
THE NARRATOR

By Dr. M. E. Bradford

In the writing and teaching of history, it is the present fashion to emphasize men in the mass, to speak of social forces and their usefulness in explaining how the lives of whole nations, classes and orders of people trend in one direction but not in another. In general this tendency has developed out of such unlikely resources as the quantitative interpretation of French medieval history and the economic analysis of the Industrial Revolution. We hear of cliometrics, of the school of March Bloch and the graceful studies of English familial life prepared by Peter Laslett. It is appropriate to concede that in this kind of research there have been some real achievements. But by and large the new social historians, now a vast and tedious herd, have made a wasteland of their discipline. In the collectivizing of European and American history they have put almost beyond our reach another line of inquiry which had at one time provided the Western world with a patrimony of great and lasting human value. Horror of the past as prescript made Professor J. H. Plumb, one of the most prestigious of these modernist historians, declare in his *The Death of the Past* that he looked forward to a time when Western man remembered only "the nature of social change." And his attitude toward the recollection of the individual deeds of individual human beings, responsible men and women whose lives made a difference in the world they left behind them is, in his generation of historians, not exceptional. It is therefore against the grain of what has become of the study of history in his lifetime that J. Evetts Haley has done his work.

None of this prologue is, of course, intended to argue that Mr. Haley has been less than attentive to the impor-

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Htance of institutions in the development and preservation of civilization as we have known it. Within the Haley canon one learns to the contrary in reading of the XIT Ranch, the Schreiners' Store, the range cattle industry, the building of the University of Texas, the organization of a historical society or the operations of the Haley Family hotel in frontier Midland. Neither does he ignore the larger framework of intellectual history, as is evident in his recent (and masterful) sesquicentennial meditation on the distinctive character of his native state. And with respect to the central importance of political history he had learned his lesson from the magnificent Dr. E. C. Barker, his mentor while a graduate student at Austin.

But it is evident, even after the most cursory survey of the body of his work, that the great gift of J. Evetts Haley is in narrative history; and that his primary theme lies in the importance of character, of honorable behavior in giving transcendent meaning to an individual life—even when the manifestation of that meaning is in a longhorn cow like Old Maude or in a fine horse like his own beloved Strawberry. It was no mere stylistic gesture when he entitled a book *Men of Fiber*—and perfectly natural that the self-reliance and intrepidity of his ancestors inspired him to write the family chronicle *Rough Times-Tough Fiber*.

For the young person who is being taught that what the individual attempts doesn't amount to much, that all of us are really the helpless puppets of great impersonal forces which toss us about like straw in the wind, the Haley books are a powerful antidote, a check upon their deception by the kind of collective amnesia which has paralyzed and disarmed the intellectual leadership of our time. At the least sign of difficulty social history has urged us to surrender the really important questions to be settled by the benevolence of the state. Or else has attempted to persuade us that all who have gone before in erecting the fragile edifice of civilization acted only out of oppressive or unenlightened objectives—attitudes which justify only a repudiation of their example. All of which is to set at

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naught the prescription embodied in the corporate memory, and the role of the historian as vatic custodian of that living past. Such is the role Evetts Haley as historian has played. Furthermore, despite powerful antagonists, he has played it with great success. For in his person the memory keeper has found his audience, there where it was all the time, regardless of the reductionist myopia of those scholars who call themselves social scientists. It is that conjunction of author and audience which we celebrate here.



Evetts Haley has always known that the image of a great soul in action, as recovered in narrative, is a precious heritage for all who come to be acquainted with it: one of the means by which honorable persons perpetuate themselves, and a way of preventing what men and women have achieved from being lost, of lifting the hearts of those who must ride after them along the same steep and sometimes dusty trails. In preparing us to make the most of the great gift, to say yes to the order of Creation and thanks to its Author in affording us so dramatic a stage on which to play out our part, we are better off to travel in spirit in the high hearted company of Charles Goodnight, Julia Haley, Major George W. Littlefield, Harold Bugbee, Jefferson Davis Milton and Judge James D. Hamlin. With all of these—and Mr. J. Evetts Haley.